

The Brethren

By RIDER HAGGARD,
Author of "She," "King Solomon's Mines," Etc.

Copyright, 1903-1904, by Rider Haggard

(Continued from Last Week)

At the bidding of Sinan, Masouda commanded them to be silent, saying that it was not lawful for them to speak to the lord of the mountain or to his companions unless they were first summoned to do so.

Now some of the dais drew near the princess and consulted with their masouday and what seemed to be a great multitude.



Sinan rose in fury.

for their faces were troubled. Presently he gave an order, whereon they resumed their seats and messengers left the terrace. When they appeared again, in their company were three noble looking Saracens, who were accompanied by a retinue of servants and wore green turbans, showing that they were descendants of the prophet. These men, who seemed weary with travel, marched up the terrace with a proud mien, not looking at the dais or any one until they saw the brethren standing side by side, at whom they stared a little.

"Who are you and what is your business?" asked Sinan after he had eyed them awhile. "I am the ruler of this country. These are my ministers," he pointed to the dais, "and here is my scepter," and he touched the blood-stained dagger broidered on his robe of black.

The spokesman of the embassy answered him.

"That scepter we know; it has been in our family for many years. Twice already we have cut down its bearers even in the tent of our master. Lord of murder, we acknowledge the emblem of murder. As for our mission, it is this: We are the ambassadors of Salah-ed-din, commander of the faithful, sultan of the east. These papers signed with his signet and our credentials, if you would read them."

"So," answered Sinan, "I have heard of this chief. What is his will with me?"

"This, Al-je-bal. A Frank in your country, and a traitor, has betrayed to you a certain lady, niece of Salah-ed-din. The sultan, Salah-ed-din, having been informed of this matter by his servant, the prince Hassan, who escaped from our soldiers, demands that this lady, his niece, be delivered to him forthwith, and with her the head of the Frank Lozelle."

"The head of the Frank Lozelle he may have, if he will, after tomorrow night. The lady I keep," snarled Sinan.

"Then, Al-je-bal, in the name of Salah-ed-din, we declare war on you—war on this high place of yours is pulled down from stone; war till your tribe be dead, till the last man, woman and child be slain, until your carcasses be used to the crows to feed on."

Now Sinan rose in fury and rent his beard.

"Go back," he said, "and tell that dog you name a sultan that, low as he is, the humble born son of Ayoub, I, Al-je-bal, do him an honor that he does not deserve. My queen is dead, and two days from now, when my month of mourning is expired, I shall take to my wife his niece, the Princess of Baalbec, who sits here beside me, my bride."

At these words Rosamund, who had been listening intently, started like one who has been stung by a snake, put her hands before her face and groaned.

"Princess," said the ambassador, who was watching her, "you seem to understand our language. Is this your will, to mate your noble blood with that of the heretic chief of the assassins?"

"Nay, nay!" she cried. "It is no will of mine, who am a helpless prisoner and by faith a Christian. If my uncle Salah-ed-din is indeed as great as I have heard, then let him show his power and deliver me, and with me these

my brethren, the knights Sir Godwin and Sir Wulf."

"So you speak Arabic," said Sinan. "Good; our loving converse will be easier, and for the rest—well, the whims of women change. Now, you messengers of Salah-ed-din, begone, lest I send you on a longer journey, and tell your master that if he dares to lift his standards against my walls my fedals shall speak with him. By day and by night not for one moment shall he be safe. Poison shall lurk in his cup and a dagger in his bed. If he would escape death, therefore, let him hide himself within the walls of his city of Damascus or amuse himself with wars against the mad cross worshippers, and leave me to live in peace with this lady whom I have chosen."

"Great words, worthy of the great assassin," said the ambassador.

"Great words, in truth, which shall be followed by great deeds. What chance has this lord of yours against a nation sworn to obey to the death? You smile? Then come hither you—and you." And he summoned two of his dais by name.

They rose and bowed before him.

"Now, my worthy servants," he said, "show these heretic dogs how you obey, that their master may learn the power of your master. You are old and weary of life. Begone and await me in paradise."

The old men bowed again, trembling a little. Then, straightening themselves, without a word they ran side by side and leapt into the abyss.

"Has Salah-ed-din servants such as these?" asked Sinan in the silence that followed. "Well, what they have done all would do if I bid them slay him. Back, now; and, if you will, take these Franks with you, who are my guests, that they may bear witness of what you have seen and of the state in which you left their sister. Translate to the knights, woman."

So Masouda translated. Then Godwin answered through her.

"We understand little of this matter, who are ignorant of your tongue; but, O Al-je-bal, ere we leave your sheltering roof we have a quarrel to settle with the man Lozelle. After that, with your permission, we will go, but not before."

Sinan answered:

"As you will; so be it."

The spokesman of the envoys said:

"Al-je-bal, we depart, but within a week we appear again in the company of 10,000 spears, and on one of them shall your head be set. Your safe conduct guards us till the sunset. After that do your worst, as we do ours. High princess, our counsel to you is that you slay yourself and so gain immortal honor."

Then, bowing to her one by one, they turned and marched down the terrace, followed by their servants.

Now Sinan waved his hand, and the court broke up, Rosamund leaving it first, accompanied by Masouda and escorted by guards, after which the brethren were commanded to depart also.

CHAPTER XIV.

"SALADIN will come," said Wulf, the hopeful, and from the high place where they stood he pointed to the plain beneath, across which a band of horsemen moved at full gallop. "Look! Yonder goes his embassy."

"Aye," answered Godwin. "He will come, but I fear me, too late."

"Yes, brother, unless we go to meet him, Masouda has promised."

"Masouda," sighed Godwin. "Ah, to think that so much should hang upon the faithfulness of one woman!"

"It does not hang on her," said Wulf; "it hangs on Fate, who writes with her finger. Come; let us ride."

So, followed by their escort, they rode in the gardens, taking note, without seeming to do so, of the position of the tall rock and of how it could be approached from every side. Then they went in again and waited for some sign or word of Rosamund, but in vain. That night there was no feast, and their meal was brought to them in the guest house. While they sat at it Masouda appeared for a moment to tell them that they had leave to ride the bridge in the moonlight and that their escort would await them at a certain hour.

The brethren asked if their sister Rosamund was not coming to dine with them. Masouda answered that as the queen elect of the Al-je-bal it was not lawful that she should eat with any other men, even her brothers. Then as she passed out, stumbling as though by accident, she brushed against Godwin and muttered:

"Remember, tonight," and was gone.

When the moon had been up an hour the officer of their escort appeared and led them to their horses. As they approached the bridge they saw Lozelle departing on his great black stallion, which was in a lather of foam. It seemed that he also had made trial of that perilous path.

Now, Godwin, leading on Flame, they faced the bridge and walked their horses over it. Nor did these hang back, although they snorted a little at the black gulf on either side. Next they returned at a trot, then over again, and yet again at a canter and a gallop, sometimes together and sometimes singly.

Lastly Wulf made Godwin halt in the middle of the bridge and galloped down upon him at speed till within a lance's length. Then suddenly he checked his horse and, while his audience shouted, wheeled it around on its hind legs, its fore hoofs beating the air, and galloped back again, followed by Godwin.

"All went well," Wulf said as they rode to the castle, "and nobler or more gentle horses were never crossed by men. I have good hopes for tomorrow night. I shall do my best, and if I fail, why, then, act upon your own counsel. At least, let him not kill both of us."

Having stabled their horses, the brethren wandered into the garden and drew by a roundabout road to the tall rock. Then, finding themselves alone, they unlocked the door and, slipping through it, locked it again on the farther side and groped their way to the moonlit mouth of the cave. Here they stood awhile studying the descent of the gulf as best they could in that light; till suddenly Godwin, feeling a hand

upon his shoulder, started round to find himself face to face with Masouda.

"How did you come?" he asked.

"By a road in which is your only hope," she answered. "Now, Sir Godwin, waste no words, for my time is short, but if you think that you can trust me—and this is for you to judge—give me the signet which hangs about your neck."

Thrusting down his hand between his mail shirt and his breast, Godwin drew out the ancient ring and handed it to Masouda.

"You trust indeed," she said, with a little laugh, as she hid it in her bosom.

"Yes, lady," he answered. "I trust you, though why you should risk so much for us I do not know."

"What is it to you, Sir Godwin, why a certain woman spy of the assassins, whom in your own land you would spit on, chooses to do this or that?"

She ceased and stood before him with heaving breast and flashing eyes, a mysterious white figure in the moonlight most beautiful to see.

Godwin felt his heart stir and the blood flow to his brow, but before he could speak Wulf broke in, saying:

"You bade us spare words, Lady Masouda, so tell us what we must do."

"This," she answered, becoming calm again.

"Tomorrow night about this hour you fight Lozelle upon the narrow way. You may fall, though that man at heart is a coward, which you are not, for here courage alone will avail nothing, but rather skill and horsemanship and trick of war. If so, then Sir Godwin fights him, and of this business none can tell the end. Should both of you go down, then I will do my best to save your lady and take her to Salah-ed-din."

"Now, if you conquer, Sir Wulf, or if you fall and your brother conquers, both of you—or one of you, as it may happen—must gallop back at full speed toward the stable gate that lies more than a mile from the castle bridge. Nor must you stop at the gate, but ride on, ride like the wind till you reach this place. The gardens will be empty, for every soul within the city will have gathered on the walls and on the housetops to see the fray. There is but one fear. By then a guard may be set before this mound. If so, you must cut them down or be cut down and bring your story to an end. Sir Godwin, here is another key that you may use if you are alone. Take it."

He did so, and she continued:

"Now, if both of you, or one of you, win through to this cave, enter with your horses, lock the door, bar it and wait. It may be I will join you here with the princess. But if I do not come by the dawn then know that the worst has happened and fly to Salah-ed-din and tell him of this road by which he may take vengeance upon his foe Sinan. Only then, I pray you, doubt not that I have done my best, who if I fail must die most horribly. Now, farewell. Go; you know the road."

They turned to obey, but when they had gone a few paces Godwin looked round and saw Masouda watching them. The moonlight shone full upon her face, and by it he saw also that tears were running from her dark and tender eyes. Back he came again, and with him Wulf, for that sight drew them. Down he bent before her till his knee touched the ground, and, taking her hand, he kissed it and said: "Henceforth through life, through death, we serve two ladies." And what he did Wulf did also.

"Mayhap," she answered sadly, "two ladies—but one love."

Once more it was night, and high above the mountain fortress of Masouda shone the full summer moon. Forth from the guest house gate rode the brethren side by side upon their splendid steeds. Round them rode their escort, while in front and behind went a mob of people.

The nation of the assassins had thrown off its gloom this night, for the while it was no longer oppressed even by the fear of attack from Salah-ed-din, its mighty foe. To death it was accustomed; death was its watchword; death in many dreadful forms its daily bread. From the walls of Masouda day by day fedals went out to murder this great one or that great one at the bidding of their lord Sinan.

All forms of human agony and doom were known to this people, but now they were promised an unfamiliar sight, that of Frankish knights slaying each other in single combat beneath the silent moon. So they were happy, for to them this was a night of festival, to be followed by a morrow of still greater festival, when their sultan and their god took to himself this stranger beauty as a wife.

Now the brethren were come to the open space in front of the narrow bridge, where tier on tier the multitude were ranged, kept back from its center



Wulf wheeled his horse on the narrow bridge.

ter by lines of guards. On the flat roofed houses also they were crowded thick as swarming bees, on the circling walls and on the battlements that protected the far end of the bridge and the houses of the outer city. Before the bridge was a low gateway, and upon its roof sat the Al-je-bal, clad in his scarlet robe of festival, and by his side, the moonlight gleaming on her jewels, Rosamund. In front, draped in a rich garment, a dagger of gems in her dark hair, stood the interpreter or "mouth," Masouda, and behind were dais and guards.

The brethren rode to the space before the arch and halted, saluting with their pennoned spears. Then from the farther side advanced another procession, which, opening, revealed the knight Lozelle riding on his great black horse, and a huge man and fierce he seemed in his armor.

"What!" he shouted, glowering at them. "Am I to fight one against two? Is this your chivalry?"

"Nay, nay, Sir Traitor," answered Wulf. "Nay, nay, betrayer of Christian maid to the power of the heathen dog. You have fought Godwin. Now it is the turn of Wulf. Kill Wulf and Godwin remains. Kill Godwin and God remains."

Lozelle heard and seemed to go mad with rage or fear, or both.

"Lord Sinan," he shouted in Arabic, "this is murder. Am I, who have done you so much service, to be butchered for your pleasure by the lovers of that woman whom you would honor with the name of wife?"

Sinan heard and stared at him with dull, angry eyes.

"Aye, you may stare," went on the maddened Lozelle, "but it is true—they are her lovers, not her brothers. Would men take so much pains for a sister's sake, think you? Would they swim into this net of yours for a sister's sake?"

Sinan held up his hand for silence. "Let the lots be cast," he said, "for whatever these men are, this fight must go on, and it shall be fair."

So a dail, standing by himself, cast lots upon the ground and, having read them, announced that Lozelle must run the first course from the farther side of the bridge. Then one took his bridle to lead him across. As he passed the brethren he grinned in their faces and said:

"At least this is sure, you also look your last upon the moon. I am avenged already. He will kill you both before her eyes to whet his appetite."

But the brethren answered nothing.

The black horse of Lozelle grew dim in the distance of the moonlit bridge and vanished beneath the farther archway that led to the outer city. Then a herald cried, Masouda translating his words, which another herald echoed from beyond the gulf:

"Thrice will the trumpets blow. At the third blast of the trumpets the knights shall charge and meet in the center of the bridge. Thenceforward they may fight as it pleases them, on horse or on foot, with lance, with sword or with dagger, but to the vanquished no mercy will be shown. If he be brought living from the bridge, living he shall be cast into the gulf. Hear the decree of the Al-je-bal!"

Then Wulf's horse was led forward to the entrance of the bridge, and from the farther side was led forward the horse of Lozelle.

Now from some neighboring tower pealed out the first long blast of trumpets, and dead silence fell on all the multitude.

The second blast blew, and Wulf

loosened the great sword, in its scabbard.

For the third time the trumpets blew, and from either end of that bridge, two hundred paces long, the knights flashed toward each other like living bolts of steel. Hollow rang the hoofs of the horses upon the stonework, swifter and swifter they flew, lower and lower bent the knights upon their saddles. Now they were near, and now they met. The spears seemed to shiver, the horses to huddle together on the narrow way and overhang its edge, then on came the black horse toward the inner city, and on sped Smoke toward the farther gulf.

"They have passed! They have passed!" roared the multitude.

Look! Lozelle approached, reeling in his saddle, as well he might, for the helm was torn from his head and blood ran from his skull where the lance had grazed it.

Soldiers caught the horse and turned it.

"Another helm!" cried Lozelle.

"Nay," answered Sinan; "yonder knight has lost his shield. New lances—that is all."

So they gave him a fresh lance, and presently, at the blast of the trumpets, again the horses were seen speeding together over the narrow way. They met, and, lo, Lozelle, torn from his saddle, but still clinging to the reins, was flung backward, far backward, to fall on the stonework of the bridge. Down, too, beneath the mighty shock went his black horse, a huddled heap, and lay there struggling.

"Wulf will fall over him!" cried Rosamund. But Smoke did not fall. The stallion gathered itself together—the moonlight shone so clear that every watcher saw it—and, since stop it could not, leaped straight over the fallen black horse—aye, and over the rider beyond—and sped on in its stride. Then the black found its feet again and galloped forward to the farther gate, and Lozelle also found his feet and turned to run.

"Stand! Stand, coward!" yelled 10,000 voices, and, hearing them, he drew his sword and stood.

Within three great strides Wulf dragged his charger to its haunches, then wheeled it round.

"Charge him!" shouted the multitude. But Wulf remained seated, as though unwilling to attack a horseless man. Next he sprang from his saddle and, accompanied by his horse Smoke, which followed him as a dog follows its master, walked slowly toward Lozelle, as he walked casting away his lance and drawing the great cross hilted sword.

Wulf had no shield and Lozelle had no helm—the fight was even. They crouched opposite each other, the swords flashed aloft in the moonlight; from far away came the distant clank of steel, a soft, continual clamor of iron on iron. A blow fell on Wulf's mail, who had naught wherewith to guard himself, and he staggered back. Another blow, another and another, and back, still back, he reeled—back to the edge of the bridge, back till he struck the horse that stood behind him, and, resting there a moment, as it seemed, regained his balance.

Then there was a change. Look, he rushed forward, wielding the great blade in both hands. The stroke lit upon Lozelle's shield and seemed to shear it in two, for in that stillness all could hear the clang of its upper half as it fell upon the stones. Yes, now it was Lozelle who rocked and reeled—aye, by St. Cloud, Lozelle who went down beneath that mighty blow which missed the head, but fell upon his shoulder, and lay there like a log till presently the moonlight shone upon his mangled hand stretched upward in a prayer for mercy. From housetop and terrace wall, from soaring gates and battlements, the multitude of the people of the assassins gathered on either side the gulf broke into a roar that beat up the mountain sides like a voice of thunder, and the roar shaped itself to these words:

"Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!"

Sinan held up his hand, and a sudden silence fell. Then he, too, screamed in his thin voice:

"Kill him! He is conquered!"

But the great Wulf only leaned upon the cross handle of his brand and looked at the fallen foe. Presently he seemed to speak with him; then Lozelle lifted the blade that lay beside him and gave it to him in token of surrender. Wulf handled it awhile, shook it on high in triumph and whirled it about his head till it shone in the moonlight. Next, with a shout, he cast it from him far into the gulf.

Now, taking no more heed of the conquered knight, Wulf turned and began to walk toward his horse.

Scarcely was his back toward him when Lozelle was on his feet again, a dagger in his hand.

(To be Continued)

A Menace to Health.

Kidney trouble is an insidious danger, and many people are victims of a serious malady before the symptoms are recognized. Foley's Kidney Cure corrects irregularities and strengthens and builds up the kidneys, and it should be taken at the first indication of kidney trouble, as it is impossible to have good health if the kidneys are deranged. Sold by Ed Greene.